



UNDERSTANDING

HEALTH LITERACY

*How it impacts patient outcomes, medical practices, and
health care costs, and what doctors can do to help.*

Rendia

What is Health Literacy and Why Does it Matter?

There is no standard definition of health literacy. The CDC defines health literacy as **“the degree to which an individual has the capacity to obtain, communicate, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions.”**

Health literacy non-profit Say Ah! defines it simply as **“the ability to read, understand, and act on medical information.”**



1/2
OF THE U.S.

NEARLY HALF OF AMERICANS

have health literacy challenges, according to statistics.

This means they may have difficulty:



Completing medical and insurance forms



Communicating with their doctors



Reading medicine labels and instructions



Understanding many other aspects of health care

According to the American Medical Association, poor health literacy is **“a stronger predictor of a person’s health than age, income, employment status, education level and race.”**

HOW THIS HURTS DOCTORS:

- ⊗ Patients may not follow treatment protocol, leading to poor outcomes
- ⊗ Patients may abandon your practice in search of another doctor who explains things better
- ⊗ Patients may take the incorrect dose of medication, putting their health at risk and your practice at risk for a malpractice lawsuit
- ⊗ Patients who do not understand their doctors’ instructions may rate them poorly on patient satisfaction surveys or rating sites

Health Literacy

BY THE NUMBERS

ADULT POPULATION

ONLY 12% of U.S. adults have proficient health literacy.



ONLY 9% of U.S. adults have proficient numeracy, the ability to understand and work with numbers.

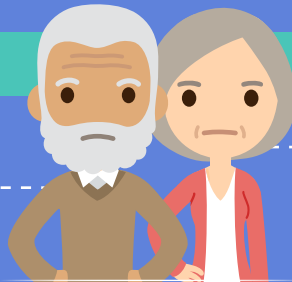


OVER 1/3 of U.S. adults or roughly **77 million people**—would have difficulty with common health tasks, such as following directions on a prescription drug label or adhering to a childhood immunization schedule using a standard chart.



ELDERLY POPULATION

2/3 OF U.S. ADULTS AGE 60+ have inadequate or marginal literacy skills.



81% OF U.S. ADULTS AGE 60+ at a public hospital could not read or understand basic materials such as prescription labels.

WHAT IT COSTS

\$73 BILLION in federal health care expenditures can be attributed to low health literacy skills, mostly due to longer hospital stays.



\$236 BILLION is the estimated annual cost to the U.S. economy of low health literacy through all its impacts. *(medical errors, increased illness and disability, loss of wages, and compromised public health)*

Health Literacy's Hidden Challenges



Given that limited health literacy affects nearly half of all adults in the U.S., odds are that some of them are your patients. Recognizing them is not always easy, however.

People of all ages, education levels, races, and ethnicities can face health literacy and numeracy challenges.

Health literacy depends on context, notes U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.



PATIENTS CAN STRUGGLE WHEN:



They are not familiar with medical terms or how their bodies work.



They have to interpret numbers or risks to make a health care decision.



They are diagnosed with a serious illness and are scared or confused.



They have complex conditions that require complicated self-care.

Since **patients may be unaware or embarrassed** that they don't understand something, it's best to tailor your patient education to meet the needs of all patients, and to take a proactive approach.

Two Ways to Improve Health Literacy

NARRATED ANIMATIONS 1

A recent study found that spoken animation is the **best way to communicate complex health information** to people with low health literacy, while not negatively influencing people with high health literacy. Verbal-only explanations are not ideal because health care providers often use complex language or scientific terminology—“medicalese”—that **patients don’t understand**.

Also, studies show that most patients forget most of what their doctor tells them during appointments. In over 60 percent of cases, patients misunderstood directions after a visit to the doctor’s office.

(Source: The New York Times)

BY ADDING PICTURES TO TEXT

(vs. text alone), **patients are:**



6x as likely to understand the patient education materials



1.3x as likely to understand their condition



1.5x as likely to correctly answer questions about their care instructions

2 THE TEACH-BACK TECHNIQUE

In addition to using patient education videos with narrated animations, an effective way to **check your patients’ understanding** is to use the teach-back technique.

This method is **useful for all levels of literacy** because it gives you the information you need to help individual patients.

⊗ DON’T SAY:

“Do you have any questions?”

☑ DO SAY:

“I want to make sure I clearly explained that and didn’t leave out anything important.

Could you tell me, in your own words...”

- “How would you explain that to...?”
- “How would you know if...?”
- “Show me how you would...”
- “What would you do if...?”

How Understanding Numbers Factors In

Part of health literacy is numeracy—using and understanding numbers in health care situations. Like low health literacy, “poor numeracy skills are widespread and affect more than just those with lower income or less education,” notes the National Academy of Medicine (NAM). Factors such as emotional stress, perhaps from a recent diagnosis; lack of confidence; or simply a dislike of math can all affect patients’ understanding of numbers.

NUMERACY PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN:

- ✓ Understanding disease risk and data
- ✓ Adhering to a medication schedule
- ✓ Calculating the cost of health insurance deductibles, co-pays, and out-of-pocket costs

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE NUMERACY:

Do the math for patients.

For example, instead of advising someone to lose a certain percentage of their body weight, requiring them to calculate a percentage, advise them to lose a precise number of pounds.

Be consistent. Present numbers in consistent/expected formats to make it easier to compare numbers—that is, compare “10 out of 40” to “20 out of 40,” not to “10 out of 20.”

Be both positive and negative.

Use both positive and negative frames to describe a risk in numerical terms. For example “1 out of 10 women who take this medicine have side effects. This means that 9 out of 10 women do not.”

Use visuals. Combining images and shapes with numbers and words can better convey information. Use charts, graphs, pictographs, and diagrams when helpful.



LEARN MORE ABOUT Rendia

Get in touch with us today! Rendia’s interactive patient education technology can help your practice communicate complex topics to patients of all health literacy levels.

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